



# Incidental Transformations

## Ian Thomas and Jon Shumway

CERAMICS ARTIST IAN F THOMAS AND VIDEO ARTIST Jon Shumway created a multimedia installation at the Brazos Gallery at Richland College in Dallas, Texas, US. The duo teaches at Slippery Rock University in Pennsylvania and has worked together on numerous projects. What initially drew me to this exhibition was the collaborative nature of the project.

In ceramics, it is unusual to see interdisciplinary collaboration, especially with a media/time-based artist. The resulting exhibition *Incidental Transformations* ruptures notions of traditional ceramics, as well as expands the possibilities of gallery architecture.

In most ceramics exhibitions, objects are displayed on pedestals or on shelves mounted to gallery walls.

Thomas and Shumway defy this ritual. In their work, objects become part of the wall or gallery floor. The decision to integrate the work into the gallery architecture creates a dynamic and more experiential viewing environment. In one work, two white earthenware domes morph from the gallery wall as a video projection of earth and water animates the domes and extends over two gallery walls. Filmed at a gravel processing plant in Pennsylvania, the work presents an interesting paradox. What at first appears to look like 'nature' is in fact something created by human force with detrimental consequences to the environment. The video contains the four elements of fire, earth, water and air projected in a continuous cycle.

In another work, a large ceramic pill is balancing precariously on an upturned shelf near the floor. Whereas pedestals are made to elevate a work's status or at least draw the viewer's focus to the object,

this small pedestal/shelf functions to destabilise the object, forcing the viewer to crouch down and examine the work or at least to avoid tripping over it. The play on scale adds absurdist humour, symbolising the value our society places on pharmaceuticals as the facilitator of change.

Another aspect of traditional ceramics is the finish or glaze. For Thomas and Shumway, the video serves as the glaze, transforming the ceramic object into one of continuous flux. Thomas experimented with a variety of paints, finding that the matt white finish best reflected the video. In one area of the gallery, a ceramic Klein bottle is suspended from two pieces of plywood. Video projections of the body's interior and exterior surfaces are sequenced with domestic architecture textures and Mobius strip schematics. Invented by a German mathematician in 1882, the Klein bottle is like a three-dimensional Mobius strip

## *A Review by Colette Copeland*



– an object that does not have a definable surface, thus referencing infinity. Playing on a continuous loop, the videos theoretically could continue towards infinity, or at least until the projector bulb burns out. Conceptually, I am not sure about the significance of the Klein bottle. Perhaps it provided Thomas with a structural challenge in creating a three-dimensional object based on mathematical equations.

In another work three ceramic domes sit on the floor surrounded



by a fine white powder. Video projections of Mobius strips activate the objects with colour and light. The powder is a reference to fine china dust, but also the dust extracted during the strip mining process. The dust relates to the work with the strip mining video. Each of the works contains an element from another work, a decision

that integrates the exhibition as a whole.

Another strategy for rupturing ceramic's traditions is the inclusion of mass produced ceramic objects with handcrafted ceramics. In several cases, I could not tell the difference between what was made and what was purchased. For example, a white ceramic planter functions as a pedestal for a plant. Rather than supporting the plant as a vessel that allows for growth, the object serves to promote the plant's eventual demise. A fan blows on the plant, further facilitating its ultimate death. The planter looks like a store bought item, although Thomas meticulously handcrafted it. The artist shared with me the inside joke that people always ask him if he can make a pot/planter. He finally did, yet constructed one that is completely dysfunctional.

In another work, a white pedestal is on its side – one end slightly elevated at a precarious angle. The artists transformed the pedestal into a peepshow. Gazing inside the peephole, I saw two ceramic kitties. Again, I was not sure if Thomas cast the objects or purchased them. He confirmed that he purchased them at \$1 a piece. The work is a reference to the neo-kitsch movement. It is a funny piece, but lacks the complexity of other works in the exhibit.

My only criticism of the exhibition involves its prankster moments. While the prankster in me appreciates the gestures, I question whether these moments detract from the show's cohesion. On the far wall of the gallery, 28 chairs were turned towards the wall. The 'work' on the wall was the wooden shipping pallet. The Duchampian action allows the



viewer to question whether the pallet is art and/or whether they should be sitting in the chairs looking at 'said art'. I did not, however, see the connection between this work and the other works on display.

Another element in the exhibition is how the artists expanded the boundaries of the gallery architecture. Besides turning pedestals and moveable walls on their sides, the artists put ceramic objects in places not typically used in galleries. The tops of the walls became shelves for small ceramic objects. Discovering these small gems rewarded viewers who looked beyond eye level. In some works, the artists expanded the lines of the walls or projections by creating masking tape lines on the floor or pencil drawings on the wall that were references to the key-stoning that occurs with the projection distortion. By using the formal lines of the gallery space to create wall and floor drawings, the artists transposed the function of the gallery architecture. This further integrates the work with the space. Rarely have I seen an exhibition incorporate the formal gallery architecture in such a manner.

In thinking about the exhibit title *Incidental Transformations*, I wonder about the word incidental, which means related and of little consequence. While the exhibition was an exploration of the idea of transformation on multiple levels (transforming the gallery architecture, transforming the white ceramic objects and transforming the viewer experience) none of these ideas seemed inconsequential. In fact, the ideas are vital or essential to the work. It is this complexity and various layers of transformation that is the exhibition's strength.

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Multi-media artist Colette Copeland lives Dallas, Texas, where she teaches at both Richland and Collin Colleges. She also writes for *Glasstire Magazine* and a Mexican food blog for *Pegasus News* (<http://www.pegasusnews.com/content-partner/colettes-dallas-mexican-food-reviews/>) ([www.colettecopeland.com](http://www.colettecopeland.com)).

